

Military Readiness Review

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The U.S. Air Force and Kosovo:

Readiness Strained to the Limit

"We cannot continue to accumulate contingencies. At some point, you've got to figure out how to get out of something."

— **General Michael Hawley, United States Air Force (Ret.),**
former Commander, Air Combat Command

According to senior Air Force leaders and Department of Defense officials, Operation Allied Force in Kosovo overextended the U.S. Air Force. The strains on the Air Force were so significant that Air Force leaders have recently indicated that they may ask Secretary of Defense Cohen for a temporary reprieve in the number of missions the Air Force must conduct over the next six to eight months in order to give service personnel and equipment time to recover from Operation Allied Force. The call for a respite raises serious doubts about whether the Air Force has sufficient forces at proper readiness levels to execute the two major theater war (MTW) requirement called for in the National Military Strategy.

One MTW Level of Effort - Although Operation Allied Force was originally considered a "lesser regional contingency," both General Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Hawley, then Commander of Air Combat Command, have stated that Operation Allied Force ultimately became the equivalent of an MTW level of effort for the Air Force. An Air Force that is today forty percent smaller than it was in 1990 committed over 40% of its assets to Operation Allied Force, a higher percentage than was committed



Operation Allied Force brought into question whether the Air Force has sufficient forces at proper readiness levels to execute the national military strategy.

during Operation Desert Storm. In addition to the Air Force's massive commitment to Operation Allied Force, it also continues to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq and Bosnia. This high pace of operations – or "operations tempo" – has taken its toll on personnel, equipment, and training.

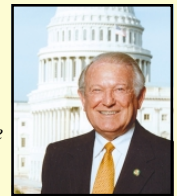
Personnel - On a day-to-day basis, the Air Force relies upon volunteers from the National Guard and Reserve to meet over 50% of its aerial refueling and airlift commitments around the world. During the early stages of Operation Allied Force the Air Force met these commitments with volunteers. However, as Operation Allied Force extended and

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Chairman's Views...

Over the last nine months, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have concluded that the ability of the U.S. armed forces to meet the requirements of the National Military Strategy entails "moderate to high risk." This disturbing assessment was made even before Operation Allied Force commenced in the Balkans. As a "major theater war," Operation Allied Force overextended the U.S. Air Force, placing heavy demands on aerial

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refueling, reconnaissance and electronic warfare units. Fighter, bomber, tanker, airlift and training units not involved in Operation Allied Force – those units presumably necessary to fight two major theater wars elsewhere in the world – experienced a significant drop in readiness. This "high-risk" strategy is unacceptable. Absent a sustained bipartisan commitment to revitalizing America's armed forces, we will continue to ask our troops to do more with less - a strategy guaranteed to fail. Unless our nation fields the forces and provides the resources necessary to execute the National Military Strategy, we will surely inherit a more dangerous world in which America's credibility and resolve are put to the test with alarming frequency.

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the conflict expanded, the Air Force experienced shortages of pilots and enlisted personnel which ultimately required President Clinton to authorize the *involuntary* activation (or “call-up”) of up to 33,102 National Guard and Reserve personnel. Even after the reserve call-up, the Air Force continued to experience personnel shortages. Consequently, the Air Force was compelled to take the highly unusual step of initiating a measure called “stop-loss,” which prevented key active duty and Reserve personnel from leaving the service before the end of the conflict.

Even with stop-loss and the Presidential call-up, units deployed to Operation Allied Force experienced shortages of key enlisted personnel. The Air Force was compelled to solve this problem by “stealing” personnel from units at home to fill personnel shortfalls in units deployed overseas. For example, the 333rd Fighter Squadron, one of only two F-15E training squadrons in the Air Force, lost five senior enlisted supervisors to deploying operational squadrons. This loss of key personnel forced, in part, the 333rd to reduce training flights from 371 in March down to only 257 in May and resulted in a 50% loss in student graduations during that period. Even after these personnel moves, some Air Force commands continue to report personnel shortages. Air Mobility Command, which provides strategic airlift and aerial refueling for all of America’s armed forces, reported throughout Allied Force that it was below the 85% manning level standard for crew chiefs, fuels personnel, jet mechanics, communications personnel, and electronics maintenance personnel.

A shortage of Air Force pilots also posed problems. On average, 70 pilots leave the Air Force every month and are not replaced. By fiscal year 2002, the active duty Air Force, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve are projected to be short a total of 3,200 pilots. The total percentage of Air Force pilots leaving the service is up 322% in just the last five years. As a result, during Operation Allied Force the Air Force had to pull experienced pilots from non-deploying units to fly with deployed squadrons, with the resulting loss of readiness in those units that were left behind.

Parts - In fiscal year 1998, the Air Force deliberately underfunded its spare parts requirements in order to better fund underfunded modernization programs. The resulting parts shortage was subsequently exacerbated by the high pace of operations in Operation Allied Force.

Cannibalization rates (the percentage of aircraft that are repaired with parts taken from another aircraft) for Air Force aircraft also rose as part shortages became more severe. The cannibalization rates for fighter aircraft have steadily risen this decade, and bomber cannibalization rates have remained at unacceptably high levels. The cannibalization rate for the B-1B is 99% - virtually every aircraft that flies a mission has a part cannibalized from another B-1B. As Allied Force began, cannibalization increased even further as aircraft not deploying



The Air Force’s bomber cannibalization rate is an unacceptably high 70%. The B-1B cannibalization rate is 99%.

for the air campaign were stripped of parts necessary for aircraft that were deploying. One of the five B-1Bs forward deployed to Operation Allied Force was deployed only as a source of spare parts for the other four aircraft.

Spare parts shortages also translate into declining mission capable rates – an aircraft’s preparedness to perform assigned missions. The overall mission capable rates for Air Force fighters has declined steadily from a high of 88.4% in 1991 to a current rate of 74.8%. During Operation Allied Force, the mission capable rate for stateside B-1B bombers fell to only about 40%, significantly below the Air Force standard. For the C-5 airlift aircraft, the mission capable rates declined in April to 62%, well below the Air Force’s C-5 mission capable standard of 75%.

Training - With fewer aircraft, maintenance personnel, spare parts and refueling tankers left at home, training across the Air Force has suffered. At Robins Air Force Base, Georgia, E-8 JSTARS (the airborne battle management and command and control platform) training operations were completely shut down as the only training aircraft was deployed to support Operation Allied Force. As a result, no new pilots were able to undergo training to replace the already over-worked JSTARS crews. Additionally, Air Mobility Command canceled 173 refueling tanker training support missions in April, 123 in May and 129 more in June. Consequently, critical pilot qualifications lapsed and many major exercises were canceled or curtailed.

Summary - Prior to the start of Operation Allied Force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that the ability of the U.S. armed forces to execute the National Military Strategy involved “moderate to high risk.” During the conduct of Operation Allied Force, this risk substantially increased as the readiness of the Air Force to execute two major theater wars seriously declined. As Secretary of Defense William Cohen has stated, “We have a situation where we have a smaller force and we have more missions, and so... we are wearing out our systems, wearing out our people.”